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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAMA 001503

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR G/TIP AND NEA/ARPI
LONDON FOR ETHAN GOLDRICH

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TAGS: PHUM KDEM PGOV ASEC KMPI KCRM BA

SUBJECT: GOB SHUTS DOWN HUMAN RIGHTS CENTER

REF: MANAMA 1482

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) On September 28 at 22:30, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) sent a press release to Bahraini newspapers announcing the closure and dissolution of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) for "actions that contravened the Law of Societies and the Center's own charter." The GOB had not informed BCHR President Nabeel Rajab prior to issuing the press release and he learned about the action when journalists called to ask his reaction. He immediately instructed BCHR staffers to retrieve the Center's training materials before the GOB locked the doors.

2. (C) Charge met September 29 with Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar and registered our concern about closing the BCHR and the importance of freedom of expression in a democratic society. Without making specific reference Al-Khawaja's remarks at the BCHR forum, Abdul Ghaffar defended the government's action saying the BCHR was chartered specifically as a research and documentation center and it had overstepped the bounds of the rules governing its establishment.

3. (C) Rajab told PolOff that the GOB's action against the Center was undoubtedly linked to the Al Khawaja arrest case. Al Khawaja is a prominent member of the BCHR and had delivered his remarks on poverty in Bahrain during a BCHR-sponsored event. Rajab noted that he had given interviews during the two days since Al Khawaja's arrest to satellite television stations Al Hurra and Al Jazirah as well as Radio Sawa and he was careful to limit his comments to the issues of Al Khawaja's arrest and poverty in the Kingdom, and not attack the Prime Minister in any way. He added that he did not know what to do next and was unsure whether he could pursue a legal case. (Note: Radio Sawa correspondent told PAO today that during her interview with Rajab, he clearly denounced the Prime Minister by name. The correspondent decided not to air Rajab's comments in order to protect him. End Note.)

Trafficking in Persons Assistance

4. (C) Rajab mentioned that the closure forced him to cease immediately the BCHR's rescue and assistance activities for distressed housemaids. BCHR has played a central role in developing a response system for housemaids and other expatriate laborers in crisis, even serving as the primary civil society contact for the GOB inter-ministerial committee on trafficking in persons. He added that BCHR's Migrant Workers Group volunteers are housing several runaway housemaids. Without their affiliation with a licensed NGO, they have no legal standing for helping these women. He also mentioned his fear that the Center's bank account would be seized. Earlier in 2004, the Center raised \$80,000 (BD30,000) to establish a victim abuse shelter.

Comment

The closure and dissolution of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights represents a setback for civil society advocates and has sent a pointed message to potential critics of the government's leadership. For many Bahrainis, Sunni and Shia alike, Al Khawaja and BCHR's Nabeel Rajab went a step too far with inevitable results. But the sectarian specter has reared its head in this saga (both are Shia), demonstrating the delicate line the Bahraini leadership feels it must walk as they pursue democratic reform and widen political space.
ZIADDEH